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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL), INL FOR AAE  
(SLSNYDER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [SL](#)

SUBJECT: COCAINE CASE PROGRESS: GOVERNMENT TIPS THEIR HAND

REF: FREETOWN 505

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Meetings with the President of Sierra Leone and the Minister of Foreign Affairs the week of October 27 brought incremental progress in propelling the cocaine case out of its current inertia (reftel). Though the meeting between President Koroma, Ambassador, and DEA officials seemed to yield no movement on the issue of whether or not three of the accused will be extradited to the United States, a subsequent meeting with the Foreign Minister indicated that Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) reticence to move forward could in part be a calculated strategy to elicit USG funding. With Koroma concerned over the potential political fallout of releasing only three of the seven foreign-born accused, a timely offer of USG financial assistance to support further counter-narcotics efforts would likely tip the balance in favor of bringing the case to a mutually satisfactory conclusion. End Summary.

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PRESIDENTIAL/HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS  
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¶2. (S) On October 27, Ambassador, DCM, and Foreign Minister Zainab Bangura met with President Koroma to outline the pending indictments against three of the detained cocaine suspects following an Embassy/DEA discussion with National Security Chief Kellie Conteh. Despite making clear that the USG has no case against the four other foreign-born accused, Koroma reiterated his previously-held position that the U.S. must take all of the foreigners involved. The Foreign Minister expressed pressure is coming from human rights groups who might cause backlash if only three were removed.

¶3. (S) President Koroma listened intently to a potential scenario of extracting three prisoners and escorting them to the U.S., with others potentially following depending on information provided by those initially extradited. The scenario also included consideration of how to eventually support removal of suspect Gibrilla Kamara from Guinea (Note: An embassy source told Poloff on November 6 that the Sierra Leone intelligence community now believes Kamara to be hiding in Senegal. End Note.). Koroma wanted all three actions to be taken, but seemed nervous about Sierra Leonean public reaction if all prisoners were not removed at once. Ambassador made clear that, under U.S. law, this could not be done. However, she emphasized the considerable benefits to Koroma's stature and public image if he would support even step one -- allowing authorities to escort three to the U.S. He is currently considering this overall scenario.

¶4. (S) In a separate, more general meeting during which the specific proposal was not fully revealed, National Security Chief Conteh expressed enthusiasm to Ambassador, DCM, and DEA team that speedy action is in order. He questioned the dilatory stance of the Attorney General (AG) in concluding

the case (Comment: The AG is widely perceived as a hindrance to both destruction of contraband and efficient trials. End Comment.).

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER WANTS ACTION  
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14. (S) Ambassador and Poloff met with Foreign Minister Bangura on October 30. During the course of the discussions, Ambassador stated the Department of Justice's offer to send a District Attorney to explain the legalities of the case to President Koroma. Bangura stated that the President has a good understanding of the case, and that his concerns are political, rather than legal. In the President's viewpoint, according to Bangura, it would be a political "victory" for all seven foreign accused to be extradited to the U.S. Removing only a few makes Koroma appear weak, and renders him vulnerable to further criticism if the remaining defendants' court cases are mishandled (Note: Given the overall ineffectiveness of the Sierra Leone justice system, his concern is realistic. End Note.). The Foreign Minister stated that the GoSL believes that the drug ring is using its considerable funds to buy support in the media, civil society, and the Sierra Leone Bar Association. Removing three of seven defendants would create "noise in the country."

15. (C) Bangura said that a visit by an additional USG representative would be welcome, but the subtext of the conversation made clear that this alone will do little to sway the President as he considers the GoSL's next move. Bangura implied that a compensation package is the best chance the USG has of securing full GoSL support for extraditions. Helping Koroma "save face" politically by framing him as the great hero who successfully apprehended drug traffickers wanted by the USG will be necessary. In addition, Bangura suggested that a USG-funded building would show the depth of American gratitude to the GoSL for combatting narcotics trafficking in West Africa. The Ambassador did not commit to U.S. construction, but agreed to look into further law enforcement and judicial support for Sierra Leone.

17. (C) It is unclear if Bangura's statements were spontaneous or part of a larger communications strategy between Koroma and his closest advisors. Though the President would never speak so baldly about a desire for this type of support, Bangura is a friend of the embassy and known for her frank commentary. She could be his selected go-between to make plain his concerns about the extradition plan.

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COMMENT  
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18. (S) Understanding Koroma's political concerns is necessary for a successful negotiation. The President is under fire for the slow progress of the case, and media publishes frequent reports that the defendants are being mishandled and abused. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) is using the case to discredit Koroma and the APC on a regular basis. Fearing political backlash represents reasonable, rather than paranoid concern. Embassy supports the idea of providing a considerable financial compensation package to the GoSL, particularly providing tangible support for increasing and improving counter-narcotics investigations. Funding in the \$500,000 range would be seen here as a contribution of sufficient size to compensate the President and his government for detaining the indictees and approving the extradition request. Otherwise, the President may choose to see the case handled completely by the Sierra Leone judicial system - resulting in low penalties at best, complete exoneration of all charged at worst. Besides representing a set-back for USG security interests in this particular case, such a result would send a message that narcotraffickers are above the law in Sierra Leone. Post strenuously and respectfully requests that Department and other interested USG agencies strongly consider expedient action to secure

successful extraditions. End Comment.  
PERRY